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Raise or stick? Should I penalise cheaters or ignore cheating?

Dr Kay Emblen-Perry

Abstract

Academic honesty is fundamental to effective education and learning within degree programmes and to students' future workplace success. However, academic dishonesty, or 'cheating' is growing in scale and scope with more means and forms of cheating being identified by educators. This is only partly due to the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence.

Educators' attitudes toward cheating and the impacts it has on them personally and professionally appear to be influencing their response to suspected cheating. In turn this may be contributing to changing attitudes of students towards cheating. Educators must decide whether to focus on academic enforcement or avoidance. Enforcement requires acting on suspected cheating to formally raise work for an academic dishonesty review which results in additional work and potential stress and harassment, whilst avoidance allows the educator to stick to an informal 'see no evil' response which addresses the cheating by manipulating marking to fail the work, marking the work as if there is no issue, or not reviewing papers for academic dishonesty. This choice leads to an inconsistent response which can encourage students to play Assignment Russian Roulette by evaluating the risk-reward of cheating and create a difficult raise or stick decision for educators. Choosing 'raise' may open an academic Pandora's Box that can affect workload and wellbeing; choosing 'stick' is self-protective but may encourage academic dishonesty and limit learning.

Introduction

Academic dishonesty is a widespread problem that has been experienced by universities, and investigated within research for over a century (e.g., Barnes, 1904; Voelker, 1921; Hartshome and May, 1928; Drake, 1941; Bertram Gallant, 2008; Dawson 2020; Ellis and Murdoch, 2024; Leaton Gray, Edsall, and Parapadaki, 2025). Despite this long history, academic dishonesty is now receiving more attention due to an increase in the cases of cheating. This may be due to a change in students' attitudes towards academic dishonesty (Ellis and Murdoch, 2024; Holm, Terp and Alfredsson, 2025, and the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) as a potential creator of academic assignments. From personal experience, academic dishonesty is becoming more prevalent within all units of study. This personal experience is supported by research from the Higher Education Policy Institute (2025) which suggests that 92% of students surveyed have used GenAI to generate assignment content. This has increased from 66% in 2024. Since it was proposed that nearly all students believed cheating was wrong three years ago (Waltzer, Samuelson and Dahl, 2022) something appears to have changed.

The terminology used to describe academic dishonesty has evolved over time as they means, methods, scope and scale of acting without academic honesty has changed. It started as cheating, with terms such as collusion, contract cheating, academic outsourcing and academic misconduct later adopted. 'AIgiarism' has now also been proposed (Graham, 2023). These terms may soften the perception of the dishonesty involved so to consider academic dishonesty with the gravity it requires, this paper adopts the traditional name, 'cheating'.

Despite the old saying, 'cheats never prosper', it appears that many current students do not take this seriously. Whilst the costs of being a cheater generally depend on the seriousness of cheating and range from having to resubmit the assessment (without or without a minimum pass

grade applied), retake the unit of study at their own expense, have their degree classification downgraded to a minimum pass or to be expelled from their university, many students appear not to consider these potential outcomes; the benefits of cheating frequently outweigh the likelihood, risk and cost of being caught (Miles, Campbell and Ruxton, 2022). Cheating may therefore have become a game of Assignment Russian Roulette.

Although the potential impact of cheating is widely discussed from a students' perspective, the role the educators play in handing cases of cheating and the impacts it has on them is less visible despite its importance. From personal experience, which is supported by research, formally raising a case of suspected cheating creates additional work with the need to implement academic dishonesty policies and frequently exposes educators to stressful interactions with students accused of cheating (Academia, n.d.).It may therefore not be surprising that an alternative approach of sticking to informal avoidance tactics when faced with cheating, such as manipulating marking, dealing with it on a personal level or not reviewing papers for academic dishonesty, is common across a faculty (Academia, n.d.). This paper offers the terms to 'raise' or 'stick' to summarise these approaches to cheating.

To contribute to the debate on the expectations of academic integrity, growing prevalence of cheating and impacts of cheating, this paper explores approaches to cheating and considers the impacts we make on the students, ourselves, students' futures and their future employers by choosing to raise or stick.

How do cheaters cheat?

Despite help and guidance for academic skills being provided by units of study, Student Union groups, libraries and the specialist departments within universities and the penalties for cheating overtly defined with the university's academic policies, cheating is growing.

A lengthy list of the means and methods of cheating in assignments has long been experienced by educators. However, whilst we used to receive assignments on a regular but infrequent basis (4-5 per 100 students per year) that demonstrated procurement of work from third parties (essay mills, previous students, family, friends, etc) and plagiarism, we now frequently receive assignments that demonstrate some form of cheating. Assignments commonly include fabricated data, shared work (completely or mostly common papers), citations using fake references (fabricated sources), and/or the use of real sources that are inappropriate for the assignment. Much of this cheating is simplified by the availability of GenAI, and students now regularly use of GenAI to create all or part of an assignment, generate reference lists (real or fabricated sources) and provide hallucinated content. In the author's experience cheating is now commonplace: in 2024-25 between 30% and 70% of assignment papers marked (non-traditional hand-written examinations) demonstrated some level of academic dishonesty.

Why do cheaters cheat?

Traditionally the purpose of higher education has been to challenge and educate individuals, with learners and educators acting within an academic system that delivers the principles of honesty and morality to promote academic competence (Cotton, Cotton and Shipway, 2023; Miles, Campbell, and Ruxton, 2022). However, in today's massified, commercialised and commodified Higher Education system these principles are challenged by the ease of cheating and the risk-reward perceived outcome (Harper and Prentice, 2024; Leaton Gray, Edsall, and

Parapadaki, 2025). The temptation to cheat often appears to override the motivation to act with academic integrity.

Several drivers for cheating have been established, including a belief that the consequences of academic dishonesty are low, a perceived lack of competence, emotional stress, pressure to succeed and unclear academic guidelines (OctoProcter, n.d.; Anderman and Koenka, 2017; Pike, et al, 2025). Ariely (2012) takes this further and suggests cheaters frequently calculate the threshold at which self-belief as honest changes into the recognition of being a cheater and will cheat up to that level. Despite these wide-ranging triggers for cheating, it is widely accepted that the strongest driver of academic dishonesty is peer cheating (Ghanem and Mzahem 2019; Zhao et al, 2022; Roe et al, 2024; Young, Miller and Barnhardt, 2018; Packalen and Rowbotham, 2024). It has been suggested that when seeing their peers cheating, students' own responsibility for cheating becomes neutralized or displaced which in turn provides a justification for their own cheating (Zhao et al, 2022).

Additionally, younger students and those achieving lower grades are most likely to cheat (Marsden, Carroll and Neill, 2005; Miles, Campbell, and Ruxton, 2022). Although when viewed from a wider perspective cheating appears to be more prevalent in some courses and by students taught by associate staff rather than permanent faculty; students on business courses are particularly disposed to cheating (McCade, 2006; Miles, Campbell, and Ruxton, 2022)

How are cheaters impacted by cheating?

The impact of cheating goes beyond the formal penalties awarded to an individual if cheating is confirmed. Cheating will directly affect the student's future learning (McGowan, 2016; Miles, Campbell, and Ruxton, 2022; Lee, 2023), although perhaps more importantly, a student who cheats misrepresents their ability which can negatively impact both their future career and the organisation that employs them as they enter the workplace without the skills, knowledge and values claimed (Lord Ferguson et al, 2022; QAA, 2020).

From an academic perspective cheaters will receive support and comments on work they did not write, consequently cheaters rarely receive relevant feed forward to help them progress academically (Miles, Campbell, and Ruxton, 2022). Students therefore self-limit the relevant support and guidance available and become more likely to risk further cheating which increases their academic dishonesty penalties and reduces the likelihood of a good degree outcome or a clean transcript.

From an employment perspective, the impact of cheating in an academic assignment can last a lifetime. Graduate employers expect their recruits to demonstrate integrity, ethics and honesty but with academic dishonesty shown on degree transcripts, cheaters may be considered unsuitable for the organisation (Hult Blog, 2025; Graduate Financial Recruitment, 2024). In addition, if cheaters misrepresent their skills through a degree obtained by cheating, competence within a job may be difficult to demonstrate and honesty and accountability questioned (Lord Ferguson et al, 2022). Mulisa and Ebessa (2021) also suggest cheating at university can influence potential workplace dishonesty.

From an economic perspective cheating can be financially damaging. If cheating results in withdrawal from the university, fees previously paid will not be refunded and living expenses wasted. For international students the situation may be more damaging; cheating may lead to the loss of support for their visa, loss of host country employment and the need to return home (Deakin, 2025). There have also been cases of students being blackmailed by cheating service operators.

Cheating has also been proven to create psychological problems for the cheater. The resultant guilt, low self-esteem and low confidence can last for a lifetime, whilst cheating can damage the student's personal reputation (OctoProcter, 2025). Failing and taking an additional year to obtain an honestly achieved degree is better than living with a lifetime of reputational and psychological damage.

The impact of cheating can also impact students who have not cheated, the cheaters' families, the faculty and university in which they are enrolled and the cheaters' future employers. This is frequently not considered by students in playing Academic Russian Roulette when evaluating whether to cheat.

How are educators impacted by cheating?

Educators undertake a role that facilitates students' learning (Harper and Prentice, 2024). We follow a code of conduct that requires our professional and personal integrity, honesty, and fairness in all that we do. Within this, most of us are academically rigorous and demand honesty to ensure we achieve the high standards of teaching and learning and maintain the ethical standpoint we need for managing cheating advocated by Guerrero-Dib, Portales and Heredia-Escorza (2020). From this perspective, educators should be able to answer the raise or stick question when faced with suspected cheating with the action, raise. However, this frequently does not happen with educators favouring to stick. This suggests that students' cheating drives other factors to come into play and overcome embedded values and professional identities. This may include the personal, professional and organisational risks and wellbeing impacts recognised by Lynch et al (2021) and Harper and Prentice (2024) or the idleness and lack of creativity proposed by Sattier, Wiegel and van Veen (2017).

Within the impacts of cheating on staff, an increased workload generated from following academic dishonesty procedures has been recognised (Miles, Campbell, and Ruxton, 2022; Davis, 2023). This may be due to additional tasks required by the implementation of cheating policies and procedures or from the need to police students' behaviours such as managing new administrative, research and pedagogical tasks to prevent, detect and manage cheating and/or becoming the 'intimidator' to scare the students into engaging with the consequences of cheating (Gottardello and Karabag, 2022; Harper and Pentice, 2024). As a minimum these role changes require educators to develop an understanding of attitudinal and contextual motivators for cheating, monitor student behaviours that can undermine academic honesty and integrity and police the opportunities that exist for cheating. This may be an unwanted or unmanageable change which in turn may encourage the stick decision to be adopted when faced with cheating.

Whilst this perspective of changing roles and workload can be seriously impactful for educators, it excludes consideration of more invasive and widespread impacts related to wellbeing, reputation and the emotional labour required to pursue cases of cheating (Thomas and De Bruin, 2012). The workload and stress encountered when encountering cheating are frequently interrelated and combine to make the response decision of raise or stick more difficult.

The decision to stick to informal avoidance tactics when faced with potential cheating emerges in practice as a 'see no evil' response (Davis, 2023). This may involve manipulating marking to fail the work, recognising cheating but marking the work as if there is no issue, not reviewing papers for academic dishonesty or dealing with the cheater personally outside of the academic dishonesty process. Choosing one of these actions may be due to the educator feeling that the effort of engaging with the academic dishonesty process does not achieve a relevant outcome, that time involved in pursuing a cheater could be better used elsewhere, that cheating is not an academic's responsibility, that the senior management are unsupportive, that the personal risk

is too great, that the resulting damage to the unit of study from is not worth the risk, that the risk to the organisation's reputation is too great, that cheating is not really an issue of concern, or that judging between intentional vs unintentional cheating is too difficult (Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Thomas and De Bruin, 2014; Lynch et al, 2022; Davis, 2023; Aljanahi, Aljanahi, and Mahmoud, 2024; Harper and Prentice, 2024). Of course, making the decision to stick could also come from a fear of becoming a defendant with limited evidence in a case against cheating students (Thomas and De Bruin, 2012) or from a fear that adopting the raise approach would open some kind of academic Pandora's Box.

Stress may come from real or imagined actions, including the fear of reprisal and discomfort at expectations of policing students' behaviour (Watters and Prinsloo, 2020). Anxiety of student responses frequently comes to fruition through pressure to make the cheating concern go away (sometimes with financial incentives to do so), reduce the penalty awarded, damaging responses in unit of study evaluations, accusatory emails and face to face allegations of misconduct and blame. However, the fear of this being taken further is frequently more damaging, particularly when these allegations and accusations can be shared with friends within the university and on social media or raised as formal complaints (Schneider, 1999; Minor, Smith and Brashen, 2013).

Whether the educator makes the decision to raise or stick it can result in stress, demotivation and loss of trust, which Vehviläinen, Löfström and Nevgi (2018) recognises as a damaging breakdown in the pedagogical relationship. This can lead to a personal conflict for the educator between responsibility for care of the student and responsibility for the quality of teaching and result in inconsistent messages as to the importance of academic honesty. In addition, we may be inadvertently encouraging students' perception that cheating is easy, the risk of detection is low and that penalties are mild and lack real impact.

An educator's perception of fairness and the relevance of penalties may add another layer of complexity to the decision to raise or stick in the face of cheating. Lynch et al (2022) suggest educators may be affected by a perceived lack of severity of penalties, particularly for students who repeatedly cheat. Such perception can create an ambivalence to raising cases of cheating and promote the stick approach. Whilst it is easy to understand why educators would adopt this avoidance strategy, it should be recognised that it can also escalate cheating by encouraging students to opt for modules in which the tutor is known to see no evil or continue to play the Assignment Russian Roulette that they benefitted from previously.

Amplifying the workload and stress responses to students' cheating is the suggestion that some educators are responsible for students' cheating or are lazy and lacking in creativity so that cheating is facilitated or even encouraged (Sattier, Wiegel and van Veen, 2017; Walker and White, 2014). From personal experience, this opinion, although unfounded is frequently presented by faculty members. Stress is deepened, particularly when it is accompanied with the instruction to simplify the assessment to prevent cheating. However, this blame for students' behaviours and choices is baseless, particularly given the easy access to means and methods of cheating and the students' lack of engagement with help available, academic naivety and/or deliberate intentions to cheat. Unfortunately, this incentivises educators to stick to informal avoidance tactics which do not open the academic Pandora's Box, but unless there is a consistency of approach, and all cheaters penalised for cheating in an equal and fair way we will promote further cheating. A two-tier valuation of work may also reinforce the perception of cheating being a choice, suggesting the Assignment Russian Roulette game is likely to be won. It will therefore contribute to and promote the vicious circle of cheating that we are increasingly facing.

Conclusion

With the rise in cases of cheating, some educators focus on academic enforcement, whilst other focus on avoidance, creating a situation in which we must decide to raise or stick. Neither approach teaches academic honesty although the former can have a serious impact on staff wellbeing and moral. Although students can be trained in good academic practice to discourage cheating, practical experience suggests there is also a strong need to educate staff to understand the importance of academic honesty and consequences of dishonesty and to facilitate the fair and consistent application of academic integrity policies for all students which is simple and supportive for staff. Through this the choice of raise or stick in the face of cheating will not be needed as all cases of cheating will be raised.

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